

# Scenic Wind Farms

Utah Power buys its wind energy from Wyoming. How can we encourage the development of wind farms in Utah?

BY EDWIN R. STAFFORD



**F**lorida Power and Light is constructing a new \$143 million wind farm near Evanston, Wyoming. When completed, the wind park will be Wyoming's largest — 80 turbines generating 144 megawatts (MW) of clean electricity to serve over 43,000 homes in the region, including Utah. The company says the project moved forward because Wyoming recently passed a sales tax exemption for equipment used to generate electricity from renewable sources, such as wind turbines.

Ironically, the Utah House of Representatives passed a similar tax incentive last winter (House Bill 89),

but the bill never reached the Senate.

In a commentary for the *Salt Lake Tribune* last April, my colleagues and I predicted that Utah's failure to pass a comparable sales tax exemption would render Utah uncompetitive in the bidding process for attracting wind power development. What we didn't foresee, however, was how rapidly Wyoming's incentive would pay off. Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal has declared that the Evanston project's economic benefits will far outweigh the short-term loss from the tax exemption. He's confirmed that Wyoming is considering more projects.

Wyoming has good reason to welcome wind development. Wind is

America's fastest-growing energy source. Other western states, including Texas, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon and Washington, harvest wind to diversify their energy resources as a hedge against fluctuating natural gas prices. Because wind power costs come largely from the upfront construction costs of wind parks and don't rely on price-volatile fossil fuels, wind electricity prices are predictable and stable — making them attractive for utilities. Indeed, Utah Power's parent company, PacifiCorp, is committed to develop 1,400 megawatts of renewable sources, primarily wind, in the coming decade. Wyoming is prepared to help fulfill that demand.

In Utah, over 6,000 Utah households and over 100 businesses, cities, and organizations have elected to buy wind power via Utah Power's "Blue Sky" program — and local demand for wind power is growing. Unfortunately, because Utah has no wind farms, the wind power to meet Utah's demand is purchased from other states, primarily Wyoming.

A new National Renewable Energy Laboratory map shows that Utah has about 5,000 MW of accessible, cost-effective wind (see [www.wind.utah.gov](http://www.wind.utah.gov)), but the state has no current plans to develop it. Why is Utah watching the winds of opportunity blow to other states?

About 94% of Utah's electricity is generated from coal, and coal interests are threatened by wind technology. In particular, rural electrical co-ops have investments in coal-fired electrical plants. Many leaders representing the rural ranchers and farmers who have interests in the co-ops have opposed wind development. But the Utah Farm Bureau supports wind and other renewables such as biomass and in fact, helped sponsor the visit to the new wind farm being built near Evanston.

Some Utah citizens and policy makers fear that modern wind turbines could be visually unpleasant, contributing to "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) attitudes. NIMBY erupted in Utah County earlier this year over a permit for an anemometer, a wind-measuring device, which could lead to a 30-turbine wind farm on Traverse Mountain, near Lehi. Housing developers objected to the "unsightly" device. Among Utah politicians, at least one wants an "environmental scenic surcharge" on any wind towers that may appear in Utah.

Such thinking is shutting out technology, jobs and clean, price-stable energy for Utah.

Recently, the Utah Energy Office sponsored a bus tour to the Evanston wind construction site, offering citizens a firsthand look at modern wind turbines. Wyoming Rep. Owen Petersen, whose district encompasses the Evanston project, also joined the tour. Scattered in clusters of five, the turbines looked like works of art stretched across

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the rugged Wyoming landscape. With binoculars and cameras in hand, many of us were impressed by the park's integration of nature and high technology.

Today, environmental impact studies are conducted on potential locations for wind farms. In fact, the Evanston

support local schools and public services.

No gameplan is currently in place for Utah to participate in this area of technology. For Utah to become more competitive in attracting wind development, the Utah legislature would need to pass a renewable energy sales tax exemption comparable to Wyoming's.

As of this writing, however, coal interests have modified last year's failed renewable energy bill to include a sales tax exemption for a facility to burn waste coal and tires, not just renewable energy equipment. As such, the legislation may not be enough.

Utah could also follow Texas's lead in passing legislation called a Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS), which mandates that a portion of the state's electricity be generated from renewable sources. The legislation can include a system of "renewable tradable credits," allowing energy producers and utilities flexibility in how they comply with the mandate. Texas' RPS attracted entrepreneurs and financing to expedite economies of scale in wind power generation, making it cost-competitive with traditional fossil fuel-fired electricity. RPS has been so successful that Texas has moved from having virtually no wind power sources to become the nation's second-largest wind-producing state, behind California.

Coal interests, local politics and misperceptions about wind power have so far hindered Utah's ability to attract wind development. If NIMBY attitudes alone can be changed, perhaps Utah can begin to participate in the economic and environmental opportunities of America's fastest-growing energy source. ♦

### What can Utah's wind supporters do?

- Urge the legislature to pass an RPS.
- Talk to your friends and colleagues about wind power's potential for Utah.
- Elect to buy wind power from Utah Power's "Blue Sky" program.
- Ask Utah Power to build wind parks in Utah to keep Utah energy dollars in Utah communities.
- Interested in receiving a free wind power bumpersticker? Call 800-662-3633, 538-4792, or email Christine Watson at [christinewatson@utah.gov](mailto:christinewatson@utah.gov). Just don't put the word "Bumpersticker" in the subject line; the Utah State email system kicks back any message with the word "bumper" in it!

project had some wind turbines set back from the ridges of the park in order to protect birds that tend to fly along the ridges. Modern turbines are slower and more spread out than poorly situated earlier models that garnered negative publicity as a result of bird kills.

Rep. Petersen said the park's construction and operation create opportunities for local businesses supplying labor, steel, concrete, roads, turbine components, and electrical and engineering services. This bolsters tax revenues to

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For the House voting record on HB89, see [www.le.state.ut.us/~2003/status/hbillsta/hb0089s3.001.txt](http://www.le.state.ut.us/~2003/status/hbillsta/hb0089s3.001.txt).